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Feature Focus - January 2011



Something's Happening Here... by Rev.

Tim Downs

I have been intrigued by the literature having to do with the seismic shifts that are taking place in mainline denominationalism. Phyllis Tickle writes that the emergent church is as significant as the Reformation was in reshaping the church. Diana Butler Bass is suggesting that we are well into the fourth great awakening in American history, a massive cultural reorientation during which "dysfunctional... beliefs and behaviors are replaced by a 'new sense of reality, identity and of self-confidence.'" Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt, of the emergent church movement are writing similarly about epical shifts in church life. There is something happening here, and it is beginning to have a dramatic impact on our lives

together in the United Church of Christ.

Where Do We See These Changes? We see it first, in the changing nature and shape of our local churches. Here in the Southeast Conference we have, as I have often said, gone from 138 churches to 50 churches in the last half century. The churches we have lost are largely small, rural and small town congregations, most, but not, all ethnically Euro-American. At the same time, our Conference has doubled in numbers of members, and has over 20 churches, largely in urban area new to us in the last decade and a half. We have become majority African-American.

At the local church level, our most rapidly growing churches are those that are proudly and unapologetically United Church of Christ. There is a growing diversity of styles of worship and music, a growing diversity in ages, ethnic backgrounds, family structures, and an increasing number of opening and affirming churches.

UCC News

UCC Newsroom

Headlines from the United Church of Christ

UCC, Disciples engage issues of immigration policy, border ministry

Inspired by the theme "Turning Walls Into Tables," constituents of the UCC and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) met Feb. 10-13 at Iglesia Cristiana Casa De Oracion in San Diego for a border conference to dialogue about immigration policies and border ministry.



Southeast Conference FAQ's

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At the national denominational level, we have seen a hemorrhage of staff positions, a decline of financial support flowing to the national setting, and a significant restructure to accommodate the diminishing of resources.

The church that is taking shape around us is a church that is more missional, is more readily engaged in the work of justice, is more innovative and adaptive, and experiments with new shapes of being church to meeting the changing needs of the communities we are called to serve.

In a recent lecture by Diana Butler Bass, she began with three questions. Why is my church so stuck? Why are a handful of churches succeeding? Why are most of the churches unable to move? She noted that there are signs of system failure in every major institution and the church is not exempt from these failures. As religious systems fail, people are immobilized by fear, and churches often respond by becoming quarrelsome, judgmental, and rigid. She adds that the 20th century is over, and there is little left to fix. We are challenged to find something completely different. What we have here is not an end but a beginning.

Ms. Bass then turns to the work of an author named William McLaughlin who writes of this time as a fourth great awakening. An awakening he says is the result of a critical cultural distortion and distress that result in a basis restructuring of an institution. He then lines out the steps of an awakening.

They are:

- **A Crisis of Legitimacy:** This crisis results in individuals losing their bearings; rising violence, psychosis, family breakdown.
- **Cultural Distortion:** People conclude that their problems are not personal, but are the result of institutional dysfunction. Often nativist, traditionalist movements rise (think Tea Party here), people resist change and seek a return to old ways.
- **Appearance of a New Vision:** Individuals rise up who articulate a new way of being, new insights, and new understandings of identity, new moral and ethical possibilities. They act as prophets of the new way faithful to what has gone before.
- **Attraction:** Some people begin to “get it” and reorder their lives according to the new way of life articulated by the prophets. Revivals and conversions often mark this stage.
- **Transformation (Revitalization):** Moderates, “undecided” accept the new vision and behaviors. There is a revisioning of institutions, reorganized communities, and changes in family structures. It should be noted, that this progression is not inevitable, and in the face of strong resistance, transformation may not take place.

So What? This is the question upon which any good lecture or sermon hinges. If we cannot answer it clearly, we have not made our case. I believe that if we in the United Church of Christ are true to our values and our origins, we will be a denomination that is uniquely poised to be the faith community for those accepting the new vision. Why? Because Butler Bass suggest these are the values that will be coming:

- **Global Community.** The old borders between nations and group are rapidly crumbling under the impact of rapidly changing technologies
- **Religious Pluralism.** Faith traditions are co-existing in the same cultural spaces, and the old dogmatic and sectarianism will begin to fade
- **Caring for One Another.** Old systems of family networks are crumbling as noted, and we are finding new configurations of relationships
- **Environment.** In spite of resistance to the mounting evidence, many are increasingly alarmed by our deteriorating environment and moved to action
- **Humane Economic Systems.** People have been trampled by economic systems that exist for the perpetuation of power through political structures of many persuasions.

There are many models of more accessible and humane economic structures beginning to emerge.

I look at those values and say, *“these values resemble our values as a church in the United Church of Christ.”* These are exciting times for us. I hope you will join me in celebrating the growing diversity of churches, and the ways in which they worship, serve and witness in the Southeast Conference.

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6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	1	2	3	4	5

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